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ABSTRACT

In 19th century America, talk of manners and morals as integral components of American character filled a significant space in public discourse. Lessons on how to compose oneself properly and models of appropriate behavior abounded in the form of essays, stories, poetry, editorials, and travel literature. This conversation on character influenced the way in which writing was taught. The titles, model essays, assignment language, and subject lists of 19th century composition and rhetoric textbooks illustrate how scholars tried to meet social concerns as well as academic requirements by combining the discourse of principles, drills and exercises with the discourse of self-composition. Attention to the moral agenda of these textbooks positions today's composition scholars to read them as more than evidence of classical rhetoric in decline; they can begin to see these books as participants in a dialogic interaction between a variety of 19th century concerns. A review of the assignments in these textbooks and examples of model essays included in these books shows the deep societal commitment to helping young people to comport themselves as well-behaving, morally disciplined citizens. A review of some of the periodicals of the time illustrates similar moral concerns. (Contains an appendix of 19th century cultural artifacts, excerpts from textbooks and periodicals, and 10 references.) (TB)

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Popular Periodicals and Rhetoric & Composition Textbooks in the Nineteenth Century: A Cultural Conversation on Composing Oneself

In nineteenth-century America, talk of manners and morals as integral components of American character filled a significant space in public discourse. Lessons on how to compose oneself properly and models of appropriate behavior abounded in the form of essays, stories, poetry, editorials, and travel literature and were replicated from one periodical to another in a way that worked to create and represent a set of social and moral concerns as distinctive features of nineteenth-century American character. This conversation on character identified a set of behaviors and values (lived or not) that represented a particular nineteenth-century ideology that influenced the way in which writing was taught. When we read the titles, model essays, assignment language, and subject lists of nineteenth-century rhetoric and composition textbooks, we see how textbook writers aimed to meet social concerns as well as academic requirements by combining the discourse of principles, drills and exercises with (what I have come to call) the discourse of self-composition as part of a book's production. My aim in the short time I have today is to outline for you the way in which popular American periodicals and rhetoric and composition textbooks in the latter half of the nineteenth-century engaged in a cultural conversation about self-composition. I propose that attending to the discourse of self-composition predominant in periodical literature positions us to read rhetoric and composition textbooks as more than evidence of classical rhetoric in decline; instead, we can begin to read these books as participants in a dialogic interaction between a variety of

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nineteenth-century concerns: including definitions of education, methods of instruction, skill in composition, mental and moral discipline, character development, manners as marks of education, and compositions as frames for society's approved narratives and notions of culture.

In the language of their introductions and prefaces, textbook writers define their primary objective as the teaching of knowledge and skill with language; however, it is the discourse of self-composition that defines the way in which those objectives include attention to values, behaviors, and habits of thinking characteristic of moral citizens. Embedded within seemingly neutral lessons on rhetorical principles and language drills, lessons on character and moral behavior operate as a subtext teaching students a set of cultural values and establishing a double purpose in composition instruction: that is, as students learn what it means to compose an essay correctly in terms of structure, organization, and appropriate content, they also learn what it means to compose *themselves* as they read models and compose essays of their own that exhibit both social and mechanical skill. For the story told in an essay goes beyond its content to reveal a story about its writer: How accurate is his mechanical ability with language? Is his form of expression eloquent or rustic? Does his essay tell a familiar cultural tale? What does his essay reveal about his knowledge of character and morals? When read in relation to the broader discourse of self-composition, it's evident that rhetoric and composition textbooks aimed not only to teach students how to write accurately but how to write in a manner that represented the work, values, and character of a gentleman.

This relationship between academic and social discourse was more openly suggested in rhetoric and composition textbooks early in the nineteenth-century as evidenced by the titles of books like those of John Walker and J. Hamilton Moore (HANDOUT). Walker's introduction explains how his book should be used to teach

writing but says nothing of its "improving" power. He operates on the assumption that the "subjects proper for the improvement of youth" collected in his text represent those values society is most interested in having its young people learn. Some of the topics of his book (HANDOUT) present familiar maxims, others name subjects defined in periodical literature as national "virtues," and still others represent lessons for citizens. Moore's title and preface, on the other hand, are far more forth-right in naming his purpose as they explain the connection between writing and character development and indicate the type of improvement Moore has in mind. Academic and social discourses overlap in his prefatory claim that "the design of Learning is to render persons agreeable companions to themselves, and useful members of society"; his book targets the minds of the young who are highly impressionable and require instruction which "mark[s] out a proper behaviour both with respect to themselves and others, and exhibit[s] every virtue to their view which claims their attention, and every vice which they ought to avoid" (iii). Like Walker, Moore's selection of essay topics and models is intended to teach reading, writing, and speaking skills while providing students a lesson on how to compose themselves (HANDOUT).

Although not as readily apparent in the titles, prefaces, or introductions of rhetoric and composition textbooks in the latter half of the century, the combined agenda of the academy and society to produce moral and productive citizens was no less significant. With the rise of professionalism, textbook writers shifted the stated objective of teaching written expression to terms of "usefulness" and "practicality" and away from social and moral obligations. While not openly stated, issues of character, proper behavior, and morals were not abandoned as they continued to be included in the textbooks in the form of cultural assumptions. So in spite of the general shift toward professionalism and specialization in business and academia, academic discourse continued to teach society's definition of the

successful, self-composed individual by producing textbooks in which lessons on social and moral conduct were embedded in model essays, assignment language, and subject lists.

A review of the table of contents for *Harper's New Monthly Magazine* between 1850 and 1880 begins to provide a context for understanding how the lists of essay topics offered textbooks echoed a cultural conversation about morals, behavior, and character, as opposed to being merely the products of textbook writers inexperienced in subject selection. During the years 1850 to 1880 *Harper's* table of contents includes the topics listed on the handout in a variety of configurations. Each topic, in turn, defines itself further in relation to admirable virtues and qualities of character; for instance, *Harper's* discussion of "Good-Manners" (1867) presents propriety, decency, honor, truth, fairness, integrity, good name, honorable reputation, and presence of mind as characteristics of good manners. Combined, *Harper's* two "Success in Life" articles (1853 & 1857) cover a wide variety of character qualities ranging from the personal to the professional (HANDOUT). It's not surprising then to turn to the subject lists in rhetoric and composition textbooks and find similar representations of American values and character being reproduced for consumption by students. The appendix to Henry Coppée's *Elements of Rhetoric* (1860), for example, includes a variety of character topics not unlike those frequently discussed in periodical essays. Under the heading "Essays, Moral, Didactic, and Literary," Coppée lists a number of culturally coded subjects quite like those in the periodicals (HANDOUT).

The type of narratives published in *Harper's* between 1850 and 1880 also illustrate the cultural conversation on self-composition as they offer models of correct narratives similar to those offered up in textbooks; that is, they illustrate correct use of language and structure and, more importantly, establish the

narratives associated with commonly listed textbook subjects. On the subject of "politeness," for instance, *Harper's* published two essays in August and September 1857, under the heading "Are We a Polite People?"--"Our Gentleman" and "Our Ladies" which clearly distinguish between acceptable and non-acceptable behavior as it relates to American character; both essays also clearly demonstrate that there's a correct way to use language and a correct way to define politeness. Simon Kerl's *Elements of Composition and Rhetoric* (1869) teaches students how to construct similar socially acceptable narratives as he progresses a step beyond the common textbook practice of simply listing composition topics to providing subjects accompanied by directions that suggest a specific narrative. When considered in relation to periodical essays on character, manners, and morals, essay assignments like those listed on the handout illustrate the way in which textbook language invites students to participate in a cultural conversation about self-composition as they reproduce cultural narratives that are both academically and socially correct. While students are obviously learning to expand their repertoire of written expression by practicing the modes of description, narration, contrast, and persuasion as they write on these subjects, they are also tapping into stores of knowledge about history, literature, morals, behavior, and the maxims and fables that represent popular cultural values. Writing on the types of character issues presented in this list, the student exercises and acquires an extensive body of knowledge about cultural values and learns to produce narratives not unlike those found in popular periodicals with titles like "Courtship By Character," "The Cure for Gossip," "Good Manners," and "Living With Others."

The enactment of values in the form of lessons or narratives in popular periodicals was also shared by textbook writers who reproduced them in the form of model essays or assignment outlines. In these representations of student work, academic and social discourse come together to teach lessons on the correct

behavior that students should exhibit as they move about in society, as well as on the behavior they should exhibit as intelligent, skilled writers writing an essay. In a lesson on composing "transaction" essays in John S. Hart's *A Manual of Composition and Rhetoric* (1870), the sample essay "On Going to School" (HANDOUT) provides students with a double lesson: one on how to structure an essay so that it is logical, well-developed, and mechanically correct, and the other on how to compose oneself as a student who follows rules of deportment. The language lesson begins with the model outline for "On Going to School" that illustrates how one gathers and organizes major points about the subject; the essay continues the lesson as it presents and develops each point in conjunction with the outline's structure. The lesson on self-composition is more subtle: it first asserts itself in the second paragraph of the model essay with the claim that "If [students] play truant, and manage to get out of going to school, they will be very sorry for it afterwards." The third paragraph, which addresses the difficulty of behaving well in class, reminds the reader that "bad behavior is without excuse. If scholars would behave well in school, they would be a great deal happier, for they would receive the approbation of their teachers." The fourth paragraph describes appropriate behavior on the road to and from school and how bad manners reflect negatively on the students, their families, and the school.

Contemporary readers might be hard pressed to imagine a student writing such an essay because it doesn't represent the kind of thoughts readily associated with students who (more than likely) find school and all its rules an imposition and are more interested in interactions with classmates than receiving the "approbation" of their teachers. What this model clearly indicates is that the language of textbook assignments which invites students to write on subjects like "going to school" is not inviting them to express original thoughts about school or write from personal experience. Instead, the invitation of the assignment is to tell

an acceptable narrative, like the one in the model, in their own words. And with this essay as a model of how one should think and write about a subject, it's not particularly difficult to imagine the type of moral lessons students might be expected to include when writing transaction essays on some of Hart's other topics, like "Obedience to Parents," "Early Rising," or "Treatment of Animals." From what Hart's textbook indicates, the successful student is one who, in the structure and content of an essay, demonstrates his knowledge of both composition and self-composition.

When read within the context of a cultural conversation on self-composition, the student's ability to use his own words to construct the right narrative with the appropriate values and morals marked him as knowledgeable and in possession of a certain cultural currency; his ability to replicate cultural narratives was a reflection on the quality of a his education and character. The nineteenth-century teacher, pressed by the combined demands of academic and social discourses to train character, teach habits of right action, and develop a "code of school morals," employed textbooks like Hart's or Kerl's (or any number of popular textbooks) to teach the lessons of composing and self-composing; some were even moved to produce textbooks reflective of their interpretation of the cultural conversation about cultivating the faculties, virtues, morals, manners, and skills that, together, composed the ideal American character. Recognizing and attending to this conversation in nineteenth-century America allows us to understand the history of composition in a more textured manner--one includes a reading of the dialogic interaction between social and academic discourses as historically shaping forces.

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HANDOUT

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John Walker - (1804)

The Teacher's Assistant in English Composition; or Easy Rules for Writing Themes and Composing Exercises on Subjects Proper for the Improvement of Youth of Both Sexes at School

Familiar maxims: Well begun is half done; Trust not appearances; Nip sin in the bud; Evil communication corrupts good manners; and Honesty is the best policy

National "virtues": modesty, good manners, generosity, politeness and good breeding

Lessons for citizens: On Government, On Education, On War, and On Peace

J. Hamilton Moore - (1802)

The Young Gentleman's and Lady's Monitor, and English Teacher's Assistant: Being a Collection of Select Pieces from Our Best Modern Writers; Calculated to Eradicate vulgar Prejudices and Rusticity of Manners, Improve the Understanding; Rectify the Will, Purify the Passions; Direct the Minds of Youth to the Pursuit of proper Objects; and to facilitate their Reading, Writing, and Speaking the English Language, with Elegance and Propriety

Qualities of right inner and outer behavior: modesty, dignity of manners, temperance, cleanliness, punctuality, good conscience, and cheerfulness

Flawed counterparts of virtue: pride, the folly of indulging in passions, affectation, absence of mind, obstinacy, gaming, and drunkenness

Review of topics in *Harper's New Monthly Magazine* between 1850 and 1880:

cheerful views of human nature

courtesy of Americans

dangers of doing wrong	procrastination
discipline	success in life
character	eccentric character
good manners	the cure for gossip
politeness	benevolence

"Good-Manners" *Harper's* (1867):

propriety	decency	honor truth	presence of mind
fairness	integrity	good name	honorable reputation

"Success in Life" *Harper's* (1853 & 1857):

wisdom	justice	generosity	nobility	truthfulness
honesty	integrity	conscience	diligence	magnanimity
foresight	decision	enterprise	industry	benevolence
kindness	economy	sobriety	prudence	common sense
self-culture		punctuality	perseverance	

Henry Coppée - *Elements of Rhetoric* (1860)
from "Essays, Moral, Didactic, and Literary" (366-367):

Evil habits and good intentions	Discipline
Moral power gained by good habits	Respectability
Perseverance	Importance of an aim in life
The Christian gentleman	Moral courage
Patriotism	Hospitality
Enterprise	The paramount claims of duty

Simon Kerl - *Elements of Composition and Rhetoric* (1869):

Affected people are always disagreeable. Describe some lady that is affected;

The amiable gain many friends. Show by contrast, the effects of not being amiable;

The employment molds the character. Show humorously how people reveal their employment by their habits;

Perseverance wins in the end. Enforce this statement by a fable;

Indolence corrodes the mind. Bring history, experience and analogy to the support of this proposition;

Describe a gentleman;--a lady,--a good scholar. (278-279)

John S. Hart. Manual of Composition & Rhetoric.

CHAPTER II.

COMPOSITIONS ON TRANSACTIONS.

Note. — The examples which are given in this chapter, while still occupied mainly with the concrete and the visible rather than with abstract qualities and relations yet differ clearly from those in Chapter I. The topics in the first chapter are simply objects. Those now to be given involve what may be called transactions.

Example.—Subject, On Going to School.

OUTLINE.

1. The object of going to school.
2. The age for going to school.
3. Behavior at school.
4. Behavior on the road to and from school.
5. Difference between a school and a religious meeting.
6. The usual exercises of a school.
7. School-time.

COMPOSITION.

1. The object of going to school is to learn those things which will be useful to us when we are grown up. One who goes to school, and learns to read well, and to write a beautiful hand, and knows a great many things, is much more thought of than one who cannot read or spell, and who has to make his mark instead of writing his name. An ignorant man, who never went to school, is not much thought of.

2. The proper age for people to go to school is when they are young, before they have to work to get a living. Young boys and girls are not strong enough to do much work, but they can go to

school and study just as well as not, for they have nothing else to do. If they play truant, and manage to get out of going to school, they will be very sorry for it afterwards. Some children go to school when they are only five years old, but I think that is rather too young. Six or seven seems to me a good age to begin. Those who are to be doctors, or lawyers, or ministers, or something of that kind, go to school a great many years. They go first to the common school, then to the High School or the Academy, then to the College and the Seminary, and they do not stop going until they are grown-up men. But most persons have to leave school when they get to be fourteen or fifteen. I expect to leave school before I am sixteen. I should like very much to go to College.

3. It is not very easy to behave well in school, so many things happen to make one laugh and to forget all about the rules. The hardest thing of all is to keep from whispering. But it is right for the teacher to forbid it, for if all could talk as much as they pleased, there would not be much study done. There is no excuse for boys and girls playing tricks on each other in school, and watching when the teacher's back is turned, so that they may throw spitballs or do something to make the other scholars laugh. Such behavior is without excuse. If scholars would behave well in school, they would be a great deal happier, for they would enjoy the approbation of their teachers, they would learn much more, and they would not be kept in so often, or be punished so often.

4. Misbehavior on the road to and from school always looks bad. It gives people a bad opinion of the school, and also of the families to which the scholars belong. It looks as if the scholars were very ill-bred, and did not know what good manners are. Besides, when the school breaks up, it makes a large crowd in the street, and if the scholars are rude and unmannerly, they incommode people who are going by. It is wrong for the scholars, while going home from school, to throw stones or snowballs, or anything of that kind, in the street, for they often break people's windows, or hit ladies and gentlemen who are passing.

5. I know that a school is very different from a religious meeting or a church, but I do not know that I can explain the difference very clearly. In the church that I go to, one man preaches or prays or exhorts, and all the rest sit still and listen. But in school, we are divided into classes, and we all read and recite in turn. It is a great deal stiller in church that it is in school, but I suppose school

would be a good deal better if we were quieter than we are. Boys and girls never think of playing such pranks in church as they do in school. It would be awful.

6. The exercises in our school are reading, spelling, writing, studying, and reciting our different lessons. Sometimes we sing. Sometimes we choose sides in spelling, and see which can beat. Composition is another exercise. Also we have speaking once a week.

7. School-time in most schools is from 9 o'clock to 12 in the morning, and from 2 o'clock to 4 in the afternoon. There is a recess in the middle of the forenoon, and no school at all on Saturday, or in Christmas week, or on Washington's birthday, or the 4th of July. Then we have a week's vacation in spring, and a long vacation in summer. Scholars are always impatient for vacation to come, but generally get tired of it before it is over.

Example.—Subject, On Travelling.

OUTLINE.

1. Different modes of travelling.
2. Things to be gained by travelling.
3. Mishaps and dangers to be encountered in travelling.
4. Some of the places and people that I would like to visit.
5. Books of travel which I have read, and the countries, etc., described in them.

OTHER SUBJECTS.

1. The Study of Geography.
2. The Study of History.
3. Cultivating Flowers.
4. Obedience to Parents.
5. Giving Way to Anger.
6. Early Rising.
7. Treatment of Animals.
8. Learning to Draw.
9. Attention to Dress.
10. Going to the Circus.

In giving additional subjects under this head, the teacher should limit himself to such as are familiar to the scholars, and involve a transaction of some kind.

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